

Vale John Phillips

Overview of John's Career

24 May 2023

Good morning, my name is Ian Shepherd and I had the privilege of working with John during his career.

Firstly, I would like to extend my condolences to John's family at this difficult time.

My working relationship with John started back in 1985 and extended through to my retirement in 2016. This being a bit unusual, given John actually retired in 2002 but continued to work for another 21 years. So therefore, he was active in technical engineering much longer than myself and I dare say, many others.

GHD will feature quite a bit here today. For those who are not aware, GHD is a professional services company with its origins in Australia, some 95 years ago. It is a private company, owned by many of its employees.

John's association with GHD started back in 1967 and extended over 55 years. That is, 55 years out of the 95-year history. An incredible achievement!

John's career can be broadly categorised in 3 stages:

- Early years as an engineer
- Then as a leader
- And then as a pre-eminent engineer

The theme that transfers across the stages is that he made himself available, delegated responsibility, mentored and supported people.

I understand that as a child John had an inquisitive mind and displayed many of the attributes that stood him in good stead for the rest of his technical career. That is, having a passion for unique and creative problem solving. He apparently spent considerable time in a neighbour's work shed where he tinkered and learnt the mechanics of how things worked.

John completed his studies in Adelaide and a Masters in Soil Mechanics in Melbourne. Many people have commented that from the outset of his career, that they saw John as one of the most intelligent engineers they had encountered.

His work life started with the Commonwealth Department of Works with design efforts on some significant projects. These included the Woomera Rocket Launching Tower and various Federal buildings. Of note locally, is the old ATO building on St Georges Terrace, which is now the Duxton Hotel.

Upon commencing with GHD, he was part of various design teams for dam and geotechnical projects around the country.

In due course, the call of the 'Wild West' and the emerging resource industry became strong, so he and his family relocated to Perth in the late 1970's. In particular the Worsley

Alumina project was a drawcard. John led the initial site investigations which then continued into the design and construction technique planning for multiple water and tailings dams. With ongoing work, this allowed John to have an association with Worsley that lasted throughout his working life. I established at one point that via John, GHD would have issued invoices for every month to Worsley, for over 25 years. As such I would argue there is no other engineer that holds the understanding of this massive project, in the way John did.

At the time there were relatively few tailings' dams and John clearly saw an opportunity to become a 'Knowledge Expert' in this applied science. He gained international research skills and technical on-site experience, allowing him to comfortably wear a badge of honour, as an expert.

In the early years in the 1980's the GHD people, and there were not many of them initially, were pioneers in WA. Little brand identity and battling with some major competitors. John and the team expanded the technical capability and work profile, thus building a diverse company.

For instance, John saw another emerging opportunity with swimming pools, with some good backup being available from the east. With his technical approach and ability to present himself with confidence, he quickly became WA's pool expert. He led the teams on facilities like Challenge Stadium, Beatty Park and many Council and school pools. He was a favourite with Architects, given John could stand up at Council meetings and win over the audience with his ability to relate how technology works and derive economic value.

This time is about when the Leadership stage of his career started to emerge in earnest. He was the manager in WA and then joined the GHD National Board and Executive Committee. It was a recognition that the WA business had grown and developed and deserved its own autonomy. In these early days, John's vision was about being a business that diversified and that could never be seen as mediocre.

His leadership style was about having good people around him, delegating responsibility and backing them to succeed. Whilst these are great leadership attributes, I often thought John had an ulterior motive in play - that is, this approach allowed him to stand back and oversee the business, whilst he continued with his pet love - engineering and the associated travel to remote sites. His reputation had grown in the Tailings area and he was sought by the mainstream resource companies to provide advice - in many cases internationally.

The diversification continued in the business in WA, with John being keen on the proposed contracting by Main Roads on various of its projects. His focus and ability to bring business acumen into the mix, allowed GHD to win the first such release to the private sector. This being the Munjina Gorge project which extends on the road from Newman to Port Hedland.

John caught us all by surprise in the early 1990's when he decided to hold a strategy planning session at Yanchep. This in itself was not unusual, but on the afternoon of the second day people started to feel fatigued (partly because of the late night before and partly given the subject matter became a little dry). He arranged us all in teams and sent us out along the beach to collect whatever bits and pieces we could. The intent being for each

group to build an artistic creation and explain its purpose. I remembered this as John displaying true leadership- understanding the team dynamics, challenging people with something out of the square and at the same time, getting them to develop team synergies as they wandered along the beach.

While we were proud of the 'national' company, John would quietly muse that we should take advantage of the isolation in WA and claim forgiveness, rather than approval. Whilst some could think this displayed a rebel side to his character; I feel it was John encouraging people to take educated and balanced risks.

This was particularly exemplified in 1995 when we submitted to the Water Corporation for the proposed outsourcing of their Engineering and Planning sections. We were shortlisted and invited to present to the Water Corp people, who were being impacted by this employment change. These people had a vote, which was included in the overall assessment of bids.

Volunteering John to be our presenter was seen as a trump card, given his proficiency in public speaking. However, it was believed we needed another trump card and John to his credit, accepted the quite extreme idea of taking 25 people into the presentation to accompany him.

On the morning of the presentation the Water Corp were advised. Our argument being that they had some 70 people attending who were being impacted and on the other side we had an office of people who would also be impacted by such a big move. The Water Corp agreed.

John was at his peak that day, with a texture pen, acetate sheets and an overhead projector. A bit like an artist, he drew diagrams to illustrate how the approach and integration of the Water Corp people would work.

Afterwards we had a chance to mix with their people, which of course was impromptu and never planned for.

When we were finally ushered out, well behind the scheduled time, we all passed by our competitor, who had two of their very senior people sitting down. They could not believe what they were seeing!

That afternoon the Water Corp people overwhelmingly voted for GHD and the contract was awarded to GHD.

This was John as a leader, as an inspirationalist, but more importantly as a person who could relate to people. In addition, John developed a competitive financial model for the contract that had not been used before.

The experience allowed GHD to have greater confidence and to grow with other similar contracts.

In 1999 John was appointed Chair of the GHD Board and he had some clear aspirations. These included being a company that was aligned with a Strategy which encompassed a quantum leap and the globalisation trend that had emerged.

This vision and an open invitation to grow opened up many eyes to what was possible and as such there were some big wins over a relatively short period of time.

John would have been justifiably proud that the international and growth vision he espoused back in 2000 has been a successful reality. The staff numbers currently being over 11,000, with operations in multiple countries and remaining privately owned.

John became a popular figure with Engineers Australia and was often invited to address the industry. In particular I recall in 2000 he spoke about a family friend named Mabel, who was 101 years old. As such Mabel had lived across 3 centuries and with this personal reflection, he went on to cover the history of a number of major world scale projects. He had found a way to bring a human element into technical discussions.

Another address was when he argued the philosophy that Engineering was an art. He truly believed this given the need to create the story, integrate the various influences and deliver an outcome that was original.

So, John retired in 2002 with quite a lot of fanfare. A great PowerPoint display and music that overviewed his achievements.

At that point no-one would have predicted that he would enter another significant stage of his career, one that would last another 20 plus years. He was a pre-eminent engineer with a global reputation. Over this time his leadership skills were more closely focussed on mentorship and engaging with younger people to pass on his learnings.

Some events like the Samarco Tailings Dam collapse in Brazil in 2015 further extended his reputation. Tailings experts were in great demand, in order to review dams across the world.

John in this period was also reflective and acknowledged that engineering was also about learning from failures. He penned and presented at various events, a recount of a number of projects in which he was involved and where unfortunate outcomes were a reality - or putting it more plainly, that there were engineering failures.

Whether it be the Cockatoo Island Cofferdam collapse or projects like the West Gate bridge and Opuha Dam in NZ, John was involved to some level as he applied his inquisitive mind to the issues at hand. This candid and overt approach in tackling some very sensitive issues not normally addressed, was typical of John.

John would have worked on over 100 tailings dams, 20 major water dams and 3 coffer dams extending out into the sea, let alone many other varieties of infrastructure. His projects won multiple Engineering Excellence awards and he had two patents recognised.

Over his career John was active in senior leadership roles with

- Engineers Australia
- ACEA
- American Society of Civil Engineers
- International Committee of Tailings Dams
- Australian National Committee of Large Dams.

As an aside he had a hobby of collecting vintage cars and I recall him parking a couple of them in the secure carpark at the West Perth Office. He had a pink Cadillac, which he used to explain was the same type of car that Elvis Presley had driven.

In the last two weeks I have had various comments from people who had been touched by John over the years, whether it be colleagues or client representatives.

To a person they mention his unassuming nature, his ability to assess issues quickly, his mixture of gravitas and friendliness, his enthusiasm, his calmness in difficult circumstances, his ability to be persuasive and always being respectful to others.

Certainly, in my association with John over a 35-year period, I wholeheartedly support this description.

John would be the first to acknowledge that he could not have experienced such a wide-ranging career without the help of many others. I have not mentioned these people here today as there would be too many to thank on his behalf.

So in summary, John was a great engineer, a great leader and a great person. He will be missed by many, but leaves a great legacy to engineering and to the industry overall. His reputation preceded him.